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FM AMEMBASSY KUALA LUMPUR

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INFO RUCNASE/ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KUALA LUMPUR 000535

SIPDIS

FOR EAP/MTS AND INR

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/24/2018

TAGS: PGOV PINR KDEM MY

SUBJECT: NO-CONFIDENCE PLOY FIZZLES IN PARLIAMENT

REF: A. KUALA LUMPUR 523 -- OPPOSITION STRATEGY?

1B. KUALA LUMPUR 482 -- CALLS FOR PROTESTS

Summary

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11. (C) Prime Minister Abdullah won a tactical victory on June 23 as his National Front (BN) parliamentarians voted as a block to approve a motion on the recent controversial fuel price hikes, beating back public speculation that the vote would become a no-confidence motion on Abdullah's leadership.

Absent were two BN MPs from the small Sabah party, SAPP, which declared its support for a no-confidence motion. The opposition did not put serious effort into the vote, but took advantage of a target of opportunity precipitated by SAPP's announcement. Nonetheless, the vote gives Abdullah some breathing room by calming immediate fears of more BN parliamentarians breaking ranks. End Summary.

PM Abdullah Passes Test at Parliament

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12. (SBU) Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi won a much-watched vote in Parliament June 23 on a motion Minister of Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs Shahrir Samad tabled to justify the government's decision to raise drastically fuel prices on June 4 (ref B). The opposition People's Alliance (PR), which controls 82 out of the 222 seats in parliament, had hoped to take advantage of the government's motion and frame it as a vote of no confidence against PM Abdullah's government. The government was not in danger of losing the vote unless ruling party members turned against Abdullah. The June 18 announcement by the Sabah Progressive Party (SAPP), a small BN component party from Sabah, that its two Members of Parliament were planning to table or support a motion of no confidence against PM Abdullah (ref A), created the impression that at least some of the BN MPs would vote with the opposition and embarrass the government.

13. (SBU) Despite such speculation, MPs voted along party lines with 129 BN MPs voting in favor and 78 opposition MPs voting against the motion. The two SAPP MPs did not attend Parliament, with the SAPP party citing security concerns from threats they received. The government influenced mainstream media described the victory as a clear "vote of confidence in PM Abdullah's BN coalition and on the price hike." The vote also eased fears that BN MPs would abandon Abdullah, either to defect to the opposition led by Anwar Ibrahim, or to force Abdullah's ouster in favor of another UMNO leader.

14. (C) Poloffs attended the June 23 parliamentary session and noted that both local and foreign journalists were keenly observing the MPs especially from Sabah who were meeting at the Parliamentarian cafeteria on the sideline of the debates.

There was speculation that the Sabah BN MPs might break ranks and vote with the opposition. People's Justice party (PKR) Vice President Azmin Ali told poloffs prior to the vote on the motion that the party was hoping to keep a couple of

BN MPs away from Parliament during the vote to embarrass the government. Poloffs observed that BN's Parliamentary Whip, Deputy Prime Minister (DPM) Najib, was in parliament for the entire session. Several journalists told us that the DPM was ensuring a maximum of BN MPs were present when the House Speaker called for the vote.

15. (C) After Parliament passed the motion, Information Minister Shabery Cheek told poloffs that BN did not have any inclination that the motion would be defeated. He added, "it was a reflection of the support for the PM." Echoing Shabery, Minister Nazri Aziz told reporters, "there is no question about Front MPs wanting to jump over to the other side." The sole independent MP, Ibrahim Ali, told poloffs the debate and the call for division clearly indicates that the government has to take note of the importance of opposition parties in a parliamentary democracy. He added, "It is really a good feeling to keep the PM, DPM and other BN leaders on their toes for a change."

Comment

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16. (C) In hindsight, the June 23 vote was at most a target of opportunity for the opposition influenced by SAPP's announcement, and did not reflect a major effort by Anwar and the opposition. We doubt the opposition believed it had a chance of defeating the motion, though some opposition leaders hoped SAPP's position and the unpopularity of the fuel price hikes would precipitate a few more BN MPs at least staying away from the vote. Nevertheless, the motion's passage gives a boost to Abdullah at the beginning of the new

KUALA LUMP 00000535 002 OF 002

Parliamentary session and helps calm immediate fears that more BN parliamentarians may break ranks.

KEITH